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Koa Kai Trains Above, Below and on Sea Near Hawaii

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PACIFIC OCEAN –

Surface Navy and other combatant units are participating in an integrated training environment called Koa Kai 11-2 in waters surrounding the Hawaiian Islands March 31 to April 5.

Conducted by Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 31, Koa Kai is a semiannual exercise event for mid-Pacific Navy combatant units, including submarine and aviation assets. The designation “11-2” signifies the second iteration of the exercise in fiscal year 2011.

“My expectations are to take full advantage of the six days at sea,” said Capt. David Welch, the commander of DESRON 31. “We’ll accomplish quite a bit in terms of training and certification readiness for each of the independent deployable units.”

Guided-missile destroyers USS Russell (DDG 59), USS O’Kane (DDG 77), USS Chung-Hoon (DDG 93) and USS Chafee (DDG 90); and guided-missile cruisers USS Lake Erie (CG 70) and USS Port Royal (CG 53) are participating in the semiannual exercise.

“Our focus is to prepare our ships, which are all independent units, preparing them for forward deployment operations to either 7th or 5th Fleet, depending on where they are scheduled to operate,” said Welch.

Attack submarines were also included in the exercise as they provided submarine familiarization training to surface and air units.

Helicopter Anti-submarine Squadron Light (HSL) 37, Patrol Squadrons (VP) 9, 47 and the 407th, which is a Canadian Air Force P-3 squadron, participated, as well.

Military Sealift Command fleet replenishment oiler USNS Yukon (T-AO 202) also took part in the exercise, not only to provide key services to Koa Kai participants but also to serve as a high-value unit from which ships rallied and protected.

French navy frigate FS Prairial (F 731) also joined the ship-maneuvering portion of the exercise.

“We’ve got some great resources out here with our submarines, our ASW squadrons and our ships,” said Welch. Welch said that because each of these units is so busy in port, Koa Kai gave them rare opportunities to put so many assets at sea at once.

In one exercise, Port Royal, Russell, Chafee, Chung-Hoon and Prairial operated in unison performing ship maneuvering and formation.

Cmdr. Justin Orlich, executive officer of Chung-Hoon, said that Hawaii-based destroyers do not normally perform work-ups in a battle group environment.

“It provides us with a higher-level intermediate training that we don’t normally get by being out here in Hawaii,” said Orlich. “In the old days, we had to go to San Diego to work in a strike group before deploying, which took up a lot of time. It was time away from family and time away from our own training.”

Orlich said that the ability to work with other ships in close proximity and in an integrated environment allowed Chung-Hoon to prepare for its upcoming deployment.

In another exercise, Chief Fire Controlman Robert Jennings, assigned to Chung-Hoon, led a visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) team to Yukon.

Jennings said that the exercise allowed his team to integrate its newer members. The VBSS team had four new members added for a total of 15 VBSS trained Chung-Hoon Sailors.

“We run drills per quarter, but to be able to use a USNS ship, that’s something we get to do once or twice a year,” said Jennings. “It’s a good opportunity to get aboard another ship of a similar design to what we get to see on deployment.”

VBSS teams are used extensively for maritime interdiction and anti-piracy operations.

“We have a crew that’s very experienced,” said Orlich. “I think we have a very well-trained crew. What’s super about Koa Kai is that it affords the crew the opportunity to flex and see them at a higher-level. It’s nice to have the opportunity like this to showcase our crew in this type of environment.”

For photos taken during the exercise, please visit our Koa Kai album on Face Book:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Navy-Region-Hawaii/167560113041#!/album.php?fbid=10150119978783042&id=167560113041&aid=284420>